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A CERTAIN CRITICISM OF ART IN AMERICA.

BY CHARLES H. CAFFIN.

SOME little while ago a paper appeared in "The Craftsman," entitled "Individuality, Sincerity and Reverence in American Art." It was written by the sculptor, Gutzon Borglum, who was roundly criticised for his views. The nearing completion of the Pennsylvania Railroad Terminal and the discussion concerning a new Court House justify a recollection of Mr. Borglum's criticism.

The following extracts give the pith of Mr. Borglum's arguments: "There are three elements absolutely inseparable from the production of great art—sincerity, individuality and reverence." "It is because lacking in reverence, sincerity and individuality, the monuments we have built are not our own. . . ." "Our architects have 'cribbed' every scroll and form we build. . . ." "They annually 'beat it' to Europe to gather ideas to restock their idealess plants at home. . . ." "Our country houses are fashioned after old temples, and we hawk our wares from the windows of buildings redrawn after old palaces. . . ." "The architect, like a maid-servant, draws over the great steel ribs, conceived as Nature conceives, a drabbed chemise in pseudo-Greek, Italian or Beaux-Arts pattern. Then he calls in the sculptor to 'model for him a few figures,' cautioning him that they must be characterless, 'just spots,' pure convention—something that will go with his ornament." "I do not mean," he adds, "that America is without artists, sculptors and even architects deserving the name. There are enough of each to give us beauty in such abundance that the lives of all of us would be better, sweeter and fuller. . . . But the common spirit in sculpture and architecture in America is at the top notch of mediocrity." The cause he finds in the public's apathy toward beauty and

in the fact that conditions here oppose the development of the individual and promote in its place the "machine." "The development of the individual is the end and aim of civilization; the aim and end of the United States is the machine."

The published comments on this article, as far as I read them, were with few exceptions in opposition to Mr. Borglum's views. They suggested that their writers had read the article carelessly and given no searching thought to its contents; many of them, for example, confusing Mr. Borglum's word "individuality" with "original" and "originality"—words and ideas that were not even implied in his remarks. Kenyon Cox was one of the critics who thus confused the issue; and apropos of his own bogey observed, "No art that has amounted to anything in the history of the world has been an original art." As a general criticism of the article he is reported to have said, "The article doesn't amount to a row of pins"—a curiously flippant remark to come from a painter who, in mental capacity at any rate, is a recognized leader among American artists. It is because this attitude of contemptuous indifference to the arguments advanced characterized also the rest of the adverse criticism, that it is worth while to reopen the subject and look it squarely in the face.

I approach it from the layman's point of view and address myself primarily to laymen, since in the final analysis it is they who are responsible for whatever the conditions may be. They pay the piper and have it in their power to call the tune; and, although they may leave the selection to the piper, they cannot thereby escape the responsibility.

That it may be clear from the start whither my remarks are tending let me premise that I agree with Mr. Borglum that much of the art in America—we will not call it American art—is borrowed and that for this the architect must be held immediately responsible. On the other hand, I think the force of his argument would have been increased had he taken note of evidences of individuality that are already apparent, and I propose to supply the omission.

Meanwhile, are we agreed—my readers and myself—on what we understand by this question of beauty in relation to the affairs of life? Do we value beauty as a commercial or as an ideal asset? There can be no doubt that to many people, perhaps to the majority, beauty is treated simply as a means of ostentation and

self-exploitation or of direct pecuniary advantage. A man, for example, builds himself a fine house and furnishes it in such style as to proclaim to all and sundry that he is successful to an extent superior to the run of men. He crowds the rooms with objects of art that bear witness to the enviable resources of his purse; and his wife bedecks her person with Parisian finery, which for one single season's display represents a fortune. Or a successful merchant rebuilds his store or offices that he may demonstrate the amount of his business and attract more. Or a congregation, composed of individuals who are striving for ostentation in their separate lives, erects a church that shall demonstrate to what they call their God that they are not as other men. Or the citizens of one city boast their superiority over those of other cities in the number and grandeur of their buildings. Or, again, to drop to the lower levels of expenditure, the tenant in the small flat shows she is as good as her neighbors by the number of so-called works of art with which she also crowds her rooms.

These and a thousand other examples that will occur to any thoughtful reader are but moves in the game of bluff and brag and exploitation that in society, religion and business occupies the mind of countless people in a country so rich and newly rich as this. To all such, beauty is but one of the means to the end of self-advertising; it is a valuable commodity, a commercial asset.

On the other hand, to many—to more, perhaps, than we suspect—beauty is an ideal asset. They regard it as the outward and visible expression of what they esteem worthiest. They have high thoughts concerning the privileges and duties of citizenship, and in token thereof would make their own place and hour more desirable. And not for themselves alone, but for the poor and helpless among their contemporaries and for the benefit of the generations that succeed them. They lead gentle lives and would adorn their homes also with the evidences and means of graciousness.

As at once an expression of and a help to these ideals they will rely on beauty. But under the impulse of a newly aroused democratic spirit, beauty will be interpreted in the fuller sense of Plato's definition, "The beautiful is the good, the good the beautiful." It is not enough that civic beauty shall come; the

slum must go. Health must abound as well as art; clean as well as elegant surroundings; the reduction of human misery must be achieved as well as the expression of pride and joy in life. Plato's doctrine was nobler and sweeter than the practice of his contemporaries. Their conception of art was a fabric wrought of beautiful living as well as of the expression of that life in forms of plastic beauty, but it was founded on the slavery of the hewers of wood and drawers of water. For us, however, the ideal of art must include the enfranchisement of the abject, for only so can a true democracy fully express its spirit in art. Art, in a word, properly understood, should include to-day not merely the so-called Fine Arts and arts and crafts, but the realization also of the inherent possibilities of beauty in life and the lives of all. It was with this higher conception in his mind, though his critics missed it, that Mr. Borglum wrote. Naturally, however, it was to considerations directly allied to the Fine Arts that he chiefly addressed himself. And these we are to pursue here.

I may preface what we have to say with a quotation from Richard Wagner's "The Art-Work of the Future." "The first and truest fount of Art reveals itself in the impulse that urges from Life into the Work of Art. . . . Only from Life, from which alone can even the need for her grow up, can Art obtain her matter and her form; but where Life is modelled upon fashion, Art can never fashion anything from Life." He makes it plain in the context that it is the life of the people, not of the fashionable few, that will be the true source of art. Fashion, caprice and luxury may produce "art traffic"; but it is from a common and collective want of the people, resulting in a need, which in turn stimulates the action of the artists, that true art springs. In other words, art must be a living growth that has its roots in life, in the natural inevitable conditions of its surroundings. Art, for example, in America, if it is to be true art, must be a product and expression of American needs and ideals. Otherwise, being imported from alien conditions, it is but "art traffic."

If we accept this distinction, we may fit it to the subject in hand. In a general way the notion of beauty as a commercial asset results in "art traffic," while the conception of it as an ideal asset will promote the art that grows out of and interprets the needs and aspirations of the people.

Let us examine what "art traffic" has accomplished in our midst. For no one conversant with conditions will deny that it has existed and still exists. You may disapprove of Mr. Borglum's word "cribbed" and prefer to call the architect an "importer"—probably the only American importer who does not pay a tariff on what he brings in from abroad; you may even defend his traffic with the old stock argument that it is better to copy or "make over" a good design than to invent a bad one. Waiving the point that invention need not result in badness, one may be disposed to agree, but with this proviso: that such importation is only a makeshift, temporary, we hope, bridging over the period until our architects can learn to be creators; that we will not regard it seriously as art, that, in fact, it is only "art traffic."

The responsibility for this "art traffic" Mr. Borglum fixes primarily upon the architect. And rightly so, for as matters now stand he is the master of the situation. It is true he must satisfy his client, but the latter's demands are usually limited to practical considerations; in questions of taste he defers to the architect.

Thus the latter becomes sole arbiter of the design and all decorative accessories. In the case of large contracts he usually controls also the color decorations of the building, the sculptural adornments, the selection of rugs and draperies and the design of every item of furniture and decorative fixtures. He exercises, in fact, a control, more or less despotic, over the sculptors, painters and craftsmen who may be chosen to "co-operate" with him. It is contended that this virtual autocracy of the architect is a necessary feature of successful co-operation. There must be a controlling mind. We will admit it, but immediately inquire as to the quality of the mind and its methods of control. Is it a mind given over to "art traffic" that compels the other workers to subordinate their own individuality so as to conform to the ideas that have been imported? Is it, in fact, the controlling crank in a "machine"? Or is the mind itself individual, in living touch with its own environment, sincerely alive to the needs and conditions of its time, and consequently gathering to its aid a liberty of co-operation on the part of the associated artists? In a word, is the harmony "machine-made" or a product of real, because living, art?

The highest example of "art traffic" and "machine-made"

harmony in this country has been supplied by one or two leading firms of New York architects. Nor does one overlook the immense influence for good which they have exerted on their time and place. It is through their efforts, following on those of Hunt and Richardson, that architecture in this country has come to be regarded by its exponents as a science and an art. From the first they have stood for an exceedingly high standard of taste, for a most exacting sense of refinement; and the influence of these ideas has penetrated far and wide. An air of distinction pervades everything that they have erected, but it is not an air distinguishably American. It is a foreign and an ancient air, borrowed wholly or in part from some masterpiece of the past and of another civilization.

For their motive has been frankly that of intelligent and discriminating imitators and adapters of past and foreign styles. For every one of their designs there has been a direct and conscious precedent. Nor has their tendency been toward a free and independent adaptation of principles of design. It has borrowed with almost pedantic conscientiousness what Wagner calls the "matter and the form," the result being that all accessories of decoration have been compelled into strict conformity with the spirit of the old design. The co-operating painters, sculptors and craftsmen must forget they are American, shut their mind's eye to the promptings of the American environment, and bend such individuality as they possess into subservience to the styles that originated under other conditions among foreign nations in the past. A painter, for example, H. Siddons Mowbray, must be sent to Rome, that for a ceiling in the University Club in New York he may copy the methods and motive of Pinturicchio. For the front of St. Bartholomew's in New York one sculptor, Herbert Adams, is urged to work in imitation of Luca della Robbia; another, John O'Connor, in imitation of the Gothic style.

It is not contended that these artists are blunderers who can only be kept to a "safe" course under the compulsion of being copyists. They are known to be men of conspicuous and charming individuality, but this living quality must be clipped and confined into a pedantic maintenance of the machine-made harmony. Nor is this all. The craze for precedents and slavish adherence thereto prescribe that every bit of furniture and all the fixtures shall conform to the old style adopted in each apart-

ment. For the successful merchant under this system swallows his morning coffee in a Jacobean breakfast-room, while his wife still dallies in a Watteau *boudoir*; later in the day they will dine together amid the heavy magnificence of the Grand Monarch and hold a reception in a salon decorated *à la Régence*, or, if they be alone, retire to a cozy corner in their Dutch smoking-room. Accordingly, to fit this medley of borrowed motives the artificers of all kinds must be forced to imitate. They are not allowed to take an old motive and translate it freely into the spirit of present needs and conditions; they must copy the photograph or measured drawing of some antique example. Or to the same ends Europe must be ransacked in the interests of machine-made harmony. The example of these architects has stimulated the ingenuity of dealers, until our grand houses and the contributing dealers' stores are choked with antiques or near-antiques. For as the supply of the genuine gives out the faked article must be manufactured to meet the regular demand, and Americans of wealth become the easy prey of European and American fakirs.

Appropos of this is the following story, the truth of which was vouched for by the man who related it: A Fifth Avenue firm of decorators—the name was mentioned—recently leased a château near Paris and furnished it throughout with “near-antiques.” They engaged a man as “marquis,” who brought with him a woman to impersonate “marquise.” This aristocratic couple had met with reverses and were compelled to part with their ancestral goods. To increase the pathos of the affair, some little children were also engaged, and to insure effect without risk some English servants who could not speak French. The trap was set and presently the firm steered a rich Westerner toward it. He was just about to buy the contents of the mansion *en bloc* when the gendarmes appeared. The “marquis” was wanted as an ex-convict!

Surely this is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the craze for “art traffic.” Even when it does not go so far as the gross dishonesty of the above case, is it not destructive of sincerity and individuality in all who countenance it and are compelled to conform to it? Can a system that, like a machine, grinds out art in imitation of a prescribed style be regarded as sincere? Are we sincere in our attitude toward art when we let such a system go by default as representing art in America? Would any judge or lawyer

or client be satisfied with a judgment based exclusively on common law? But if law is a living system founded on continual additions and emendations corresponding to the changes in the people's needs and conditions, why not look for the same evolution in art? Is there in America any sign of such evolution? As a matter of fact there is.

Mr. Borglum made only an incidental allusion to it when he spoke of the "great steel ribs, conceived as Nature conceives, over which, however, the architect like a maid-servant draws a drabbed chemise of pseudo-Greek, Italian or Beaux-Arts pattern." For the purposes of his argument, he cited only the insincere use which had been made of what in itself is a conspicuous example of sincerity and individuality, namely, steel construction.

It was at first an engineering problem. Some one conceived the idea of substituting the steel truss for timber beams and the steel method of construction for the arches and vaultings of masonry. The engineering mind at once recognized its application to the problem of American conditions, namely, the need to utilize to its fullest capacity the ground space. The cellular arrangement could be carried up to practically any height. This was a sincere acceptance of American conditions and an individual response to them. But did the architect exhibit similar sincerity and individuality when he set about clothing these skeletons of construction? Not at first. He was confronted with a new problem, the essence of which was height. He blundered around for precedents. The only one had been the Tower of Babel, of which no photograph or measured drawings existed. What was to be done? His precedents had to do with other conditions, involving the Greek assertion of the horizontal line, or the Roman carrying of the building a little higher by a series of columns and arches, or the Renaissance utilization of this repetition of motives for purposes of decorative effect. So at first he did what a child does with his blocks; he piled one "order" upon another. The plan was arbitrary and illogical, and its failure to meet modern conditions became more and more obvious as the height of the tall buildings steadily increased.

Then appeared a man of sincerity and individuality, Louis H. Sullivan, of Chicago. Accepting the conditions simply as they are, he sought to evolve from them a logical principle of harmony. He found it in the character of the steel construction

itself. He would convert the height itself into an element of dignity. Instead of putting a series of boxes one on top of another, he emphasized the idea of growth upward by shafts of masonry carried continuously up through the design and culminating, as a flower does on its stalk, in a spreading cup or cornice. This principle, capable of great variety of treatment, has influenced the design of many of our later buildings, though it has been unaccountably ignored in the high tower of the Metropolitan Life Building. The latter is still an illustration of the child's block system, a monument to a great opportunity of sincere and individual beauty inadequately seized.

It is not suggested that in the best examples of clothing the steel construction the architects have been under no obligations to the past. They have not disinherited themselves from the legacy of beautiful traditions, but in using old forms they are adapting them to the new design imposed by new conditions. They are not engaged in the futile effort to adapt the new design to old forms. This in a nut-shell is the difference in motive between the "art trafficker" and the artist who sincerely and individually tries to give æsthetic expression to the common and collective need of his own place and hour.

Similarly in domestic architecture the habit of importing wholesale from abroad and from past times is yielding to an adaptation of the old to the new that is marked by sincerity and individuality. The time is passing when an architect will be content to erect a French château in New York or an Italian villa on the hills of New Jersey. As the individual genius of American business is being embodied in terms of art in office-buildings, so the story of American family life is being gradually written æsthetically in our homes.

It need hardly be added that, as the architects learn to plan and design in the spirit of their own time and place and surroundings, a corresponding opportunity of sincerity and individuality becomes possible to the artists associated with them in the decoration and furnishing of the buildings. No longer shackled to precedent and forced into the groove of copyists, they are allowed a liberty of imagination and motive. They are co-operating in something which is not the *simulacrum* of a dead past, but a vital expression of the living moment. Theirs can be the sincerity and individuality which come of lively par-

ticipation in the life around them. They need no longer be art traffickers, but so far as it is in them living artists.

It is these examples, as yet few and far between, of sincerity and individuality in public and private buildings that interest the intelligent foreign critic. He is conscious of something uniquely stimulating in the American environment; he looks for some æsthetic expression of it in our art, and when he finds it rejoices as in something new and vital. For the foreign importation, whether sumptuous or tawdry, he has little or no use. He has seen the originals in their own environment and regards their imitations here as false in art and impotent in purpose. Indeed, he has often more reverence for what is fine in the American spirit than Americans themselves.

For to come to Mr. Borglum's past point, the lack of reverence in this country, it is a lack conspicuous in the average attitude as well toward life as toward art. And the latter follows from the former, for how shall a man's expression of beauty be higher than his realization of life? If the latter shapes itself to his practice as a mad race to outdo others in politics, society and commerce, how shall there be room for the play of high ideals of life and conduct? Perforce he becomes a part of a machine overwhelmed in the intricacy of the other wheels and cranks.

And it is because so many are thus submerged in machines, political, commercial and social, that they have ceased to be individuals, are no longer permitted to be sincere in their attitude toward life and have sold their reverence for a mess of pottage. Hence public opinion, which is but the aggregate of individual right thinking and feeling, is, in a place like New York, practically non-existent. Slums abound, preventable disease is spreading havoc for the next generation, and private greed befouls our streets and disfigures our sky-line, but who cares? Chained to the Juggernaut of the machine, the public has no time to care. It is the devil take the hindermost; and after us the deluge.

No; it is only when men and women in sufficient numbers reverence their individuality, and sincerely face the problems of right and true living, and exhibit in practice this reverence for high ideals, that the common and collective need of the American people will indeed express itself in an art distinguishably and worthily American. Until then art traffic will be in the ascendant.

CHARLES H. CAFFIN.